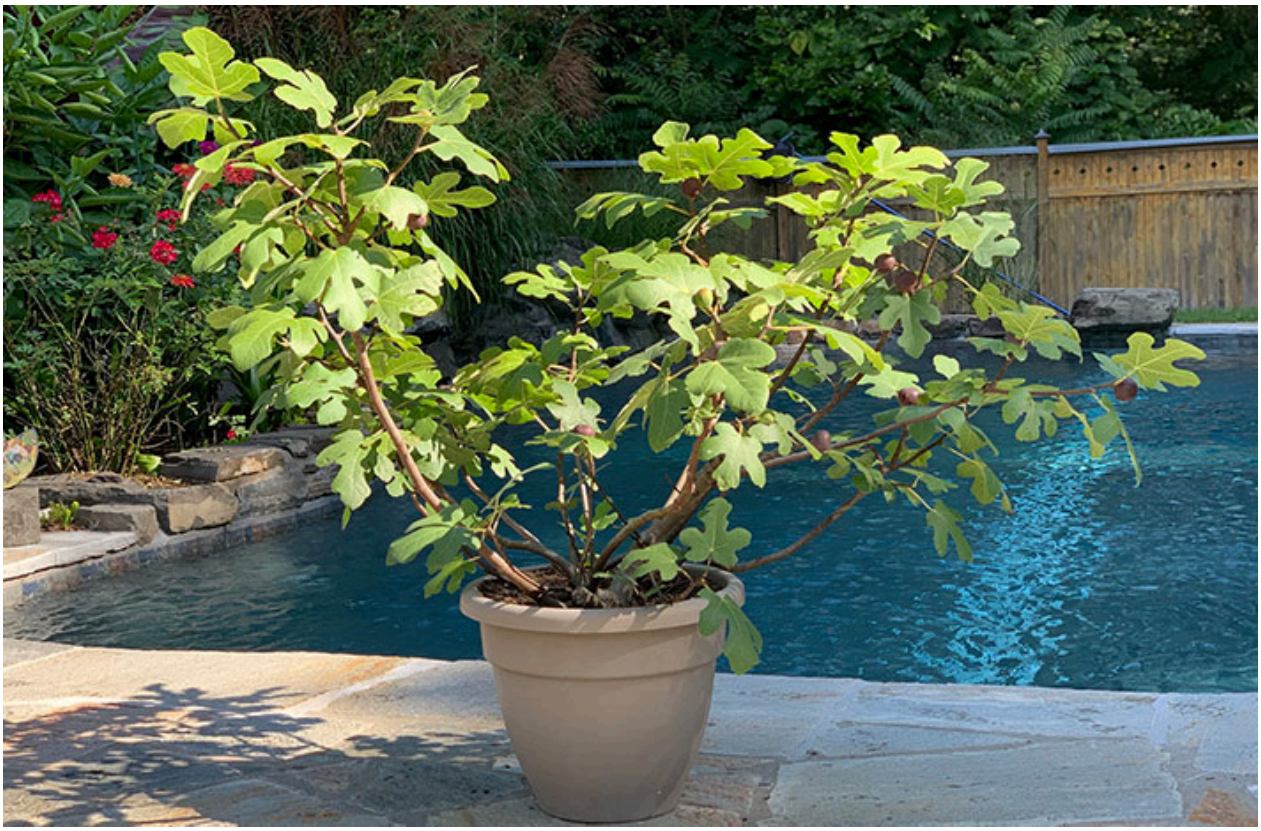
Growing Figs Anywhere, Even in Cold Climates, with Lee Reich

FEBRUARY 3, 2022 | GROW, PODCAST



(Photo Credit: Lee Reich)

Figs are the perfect plants for beginner fruit growers, and even the most experienced among us love growing figs for their sweet flavor and jammy flesh. Growing figs nearly anywhere is possible, but in cold climates, it poses some challenges, but none of that challenges are insurmountable. To explain what you need to know to grow figs successfully, my guest this week is Upstate New York gardener and horticulturist Lee Reich.

Lee is so knowledgeable and always a blast to speak with. He is a national gardening columnist for the Associated Press and an author of several books, including "Weedless Gardening," "The Ever Curious Gardener," "Grow Fruit Naturally" and "Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden." His newest book is "Growing Figs in Cold Climates: A Complete Guide." The book explains the best growing methods for different types of cold climates and the appropriate varieties for your particular climate. Lee explains that not all cold climates are the same as far as figs are concerned. Some varieties need a hot summer and cold winter, while others are better suited to milder summers. The book lays it all out.

My conversations with Lee Reich are always entertaining and packed with good garden tips and new methods to try.

I love figs and I have them all over my place. Figs are native to the Mideast and are one of the oldest fruits ever cultivated. Today, they are grown all over the world. "Everybody wants to grow figs," Lee says, speculating that it must be in our DNA since figs are such an ancient fruit. Figs are also the most often mentioned fruit in the Bible.

Figs have a desirable organoleptic quality — organoleptic referring to not only the taste of figs but also the whole mouthfeel and anything else that contributes to its enjoyment. "Organoleptic" is one

of those agricultural vocabulary words that Lee and his books are rich in.

Figs Are Forgiving

Figs are very forgiving plants. Every fig tree that I have bought started as a bare-root plant. Though I probably didn't plant them the right way to begin with, they still took and rooted through the pot. They have thrived on neglect. These figs take a licking and keep on ticking. Figs are also very easy to propagate: A fig stem stuck in the ground will readily root and start a new tree.

As subtropical plants, figs can tolerate winter freezes. In fact, figs enjoy a cold period, which is why potted figs that are brought indoors during winter are not as vibrant, Lee explains. Figs left outdoors in winter are dormant and leafless, so they don't need light.

Figs grown in the Eastern United States, and especially the Northeast, don't require pollination, which is another trait that makes raising figs so easy.

Flower clusters of the Shipova fig precede the abundant fruit that follows. (photo: Courtesy of Lee Reich)

New Growth & Old Growth

Most temperate-zone fruit trees will produce fruit on wood that is a year or older. For example, a peach tree grows a stem one year and fruit forms on that stem in the following year. In the case of apples, it can take a few years for fruit to form on a stem. But with fig trees, they bear fruit on new growth. That makes it possible to cut back fig plants to some degree every year and still get fruit.

A second way that fig trees bear fruit is on 1-year-old stems; however, this is not the case with all varieties. Most fig trees that grow in northern climates will bear fruit on new growth only. For those varieties that fruit on both old growth and new growth, the old-growth fruit is called the “breba” crop. The breba crop is ready to harvest by mid-summer or the end of summer, and the new growth starts bearing fruit at the end of summer.

The breba crop bears fruit in a limited window, just like apples or peaches, while the new growth can have a much longer period of producing if light, heat and moisture are sufficient. “The new shoots just keep bearing new fruit as long as growing conditions are good,” Lee says.

Fig trees can grow in small pots and bear fruit on new growth.

(Photo Credit: Lee Reich)

When to Harvest Figs

Fig flowers form inside their stems, and the fruit form at the base of those flowers. This is called synconium — an inside-out stem tissue with flowers inside the stem. Those flowers lead to fruit.

Figs are such a delicious fruit when harvested at the proper time. Pull a fig a little too early, and you won't get the qualities you desire. Pull a fig too late, and it will be overly ripe.

Figs that don't require pollination have no specific moment of harvest, Lee says. To determine if the time is right, look for a "tear in the eye." The "eye," or ostiole, is at the base of the fruit. It will have a little drop of liquid in it when the fruit is ready to harvest. Another sign of ripeness is the fruit hangs limply and is really soft.

The color of ripe figs varies between varieties and also by the environment. In fact, on a fig tree variety that bears both a main crop and a breba crop, each crop can appear different.

Figs will not ripen off the plant, so refrain from harvesting underripe fruit. The starches in unripe fruit will change to sugar over time, but they will not have the same taste as ripe figs, Lee points out. He eats figs within a day of harvest for the best flavor — though figs can also be dried for later enjoyment.

In California, fig growers have special varieties of figs that require pollination and have a specific time to harvest.

A San Piero fig, one of Lee Reich's favorite varieties. Figs are ripe when there is a "tear on the eye," located at the bottom of the fruit.

(Photo Credit: Lee Reich)

Fig Pruning Techniques

There are two primary methods of pruning: thinning and heading.

When you cut back a stem without removing the whole stem, that's a heading cut. This creates local stimulation of growth, which means new shoots growing below the cut. Heading won't increase how much a plant grows in a season overall, but it will lead to more growth where the pruning occurred. This is useful when you want more branching to fill in an area, or in the case of figs, if you want to stimulate growth to increase your crop yield.

Auxin, a plant hormone found at the tip of stems, suppresses new growth from the buds further down. When you make a heading cut, it frees up that hormone and allows more growth down the stem.

A thinning cut removes a stem all the way back to its origin. This will not stimulate any growth. Thinning is useful when you want to allow more light and air into a plant. The stems left behind

may produce a breba crop.

Either way, the best time to prune fig trees is when they are dormant. If you move your fig trees each fall, pruning them first makes the task much easier. But you can prune a fig tree any time before its growth begins in spring.

The more severely a fig tree is pruned, the later the fruit will ripen. Lee finds that leaving behind 2 or 3 feet of old stem is sufficient to get a good main crop.

Depending on how cold your region gets in winter, your figs may die back to the ground. The following spring and summer the surviving roots will produce many feet of stem growth, but the fruit may not have time to ripen.

You can also prune the roots to keep a plant in a manageable-sized container. Lee uses a Sawzall with a metal blade and cuts off an inch and a half all around the root ball. Then he re-pots it with fresh soil.

Fig trees grown in pots are often moved to a more sheltered location for the winter to protect them from cold and wind. Pruning the plants in fall prior to moving them makes this easier.

(Photo Credit: Lee Reich)

Fig Pest & Disease Issues

Fig trees are generally pest and disease free, especially when compared to other fruit trees. You don't have to spray your fig trees like apple growers are accustomed to doing.

Most animals don't like fig foliage because fig tree latex is irritating, Lee says, but he adds that sometimes birds, bees and squirrels will get the fruit.

These "Consort" black currant fruit have a robust flavor and are rich in vitamin C. Figs are generally pest and disease free from the fruit can sometimes attract bees, birds and squirrels. (photo: Courtesy of Lee Reich)

The Best Soil Conditions for Growing Figs

Figs don't need anything super special but they do require well-drained moderately fertile soil, Lee says. Overly fertile soil will lead to lots of stem growth and not that many fruit.

Lee's potting mix for figs is made of his homemade compost with soybean meal for nitrogen. For figs grown in-ground, he mulches with 3 or 4 inches of bulky organic material such as wood chips, leaves, pine needles, grass clippings, hay and wood shavings. Over the years as these materials break down, they will provide everything your plants need, Lee says.

Five Methods for Growing Figs in Cold Climates

In "Growing Figs in Cold Climates," Lee offers five methods to do just that. Here is a brief rundown of each:

1. **Use Containers:** Most fig growers, Lee included, started with pots. A pot only needs to be only 8 or 12 inches in diameter to successfully grow a fig tree. Pots are convenient because they can be easily moved in winter to a more protected location. The downside of growing in a small pot is you won't get many figs. The bigger the pot, the more figs, but it's that much harder to move around. Lee moves his pots into his cold basement for the winter. Any cool room will work, and light is not necessary. Keep the plants cool and thirsty to prevent premature growth.

2. **Plant in Spring, Dig Up in Fall:** Fig trees can be planted in-ground in spring and the roots will have all summer to grow out and enjoy the nutrients in the soil. Then in fall, dig the plants up, prune the roots, and drop the root ball in a plastic bag for winter storage. Another method Lee learned is to grow a tree in a large plastic container with many holes in it. Plant the entire container in the ground in spring, and dig the whole thing up in fall.

3. **Swaddle the Stems:** As long as you don't live in a super cold climate, a fig tree can remain in place all winter if it is wrapped and capped. (The warmer part of zone 5 should be warm enough to use this method.) Do a little pruning, tie the stems into a compact mass, and wrap them up. Burlap can work in warm enough regions, but in the coldest climates something much better insulated, such as fiberglass insulation, is necessary. A cap keeps water from getting inside.

4. **Lay Down and Bury the Stem:** A method that works in any climate, including the coldest, is to lay down and bury the stem. Figs stems are flexible, so bending the stems horizontally works. You can dig a trench to bury the stems deeper. To keep rodents at bay, Lee uses Bobbex, a non-toxic spray.

5. **Plant In-ground in a Cool Greenhouse:** Lee's favorite method is to grow figs in-ground in a cool greenhouse or hoophouse. Lee started in a greenhouse in 2001. The trees produce both a breba crop and a main crop. Instead of having to cut the trees short so they don't outgrow the greenhouse, he espaliers the trees. Espalier is a method of training trees to grow flat against a wall with horizontal arms that go in either direction. The new stems grow vertically from those arms.

Figs can be espaliered and grow inside a cool greenhouse or unheated hoop house.

(Photo Credit: Lee Reich)

Lee's advanced espalier method involves horizontal stems at or below ground level, where the stem is easily protected in winter. Each growing season, new vertical shoots provide a main crop. Then it is pruned back to the horizontal stem annually. This is easier than laying down and burying the stem at the end of each growing season.

A fig tree buried for winter. Bend stems to or into the ground in fall, and cover for protection from cold.

(Photo Credit: M. Menniti)

My conversation with Lee Reich only scratched the surface of what's in his book, and I really recommend you pick it up if you want to grow figs. If you haven't listened to our conversation yet, you can do so now by clicking the Play button on the green bar near the top of this post.

Have you had success or challenges growing figs? Let us know in the comments below.

Links & Resources

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Episode 048: The Simple Science Behind Great Gardening, with Lee Reich

Episode 051: How to Grow Bountiful Blueberries – Key Steps, with Lee Reich

Episode 079: Foodscaping: How to Create an Edible Landscape, with Brie Arthur

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ABOUT JOE LAMP'L

Joe Lamp'l is the creator and "joe" behind joe gardener®. His lifetime passion and devotion to all things horticulture has led him to a long-time career as one of the country's most recognized and trusted personalities in organic gardening and sustainability. That is most evident in his role as host and creator of Emmy Award-winning Growing a Greener World®, a national green-living lifestyle series on PBS currently broadcasting in its tenth season. When he's not working in his large, raised bed vegetable garden, he's likely planting or digging something up, or spending time with his family on their organic farm just north of Atlanta, GA.

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